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Inheritance disputes

Is heritage the new development industry? **Fayza Hassan** joins experts, observers and bureaucrats rushing to save historic Cairo – and finds that salvation has many faces

Not until the earthquake of 1992 ruined many ancient mosques, churches, *sabils* and *madrasas*, rekindling UNESCO interest in Egypt's colossal historical heritage, did the educated public begin to ask serious questions about the dismal state in which our monuments had lingered since the Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe completed its work.

After the extensive damage caused by the earthquake, it became clear that if the authorities did not act diligently and efficiently to save Egypt's Islamic, Coptic

and Jewish heritage, the country was in danger of losing its most beautiful architectural masterpieces. Placed on the UNESCO world heritage list and under the aegis of Mrs Suzanne Mubarak, our ancient architecture, worthy of such distinguished patronage, finally became precious in our own eyes and deserving of our unwavering attention.

Some ostentation may have tinted the ardour of those who embraced preservation's cause at first: casually mentioning the complex of Qalawun, the *bimaristan* of Al-Mu'ayyad or the Mosque of Abul-Dahab was guaranteed to surround one with an aura of erudition. Housewives took time off their morning chores to accompany foreign friends on guided tours of the Fatimid city. One "did" the Qarafa, Old Cairo or the Citadel and described the sights in the evening at fashionable cocktails and dinner parties. New adepts were joining the handful of long time fans of Islamic architecture and to accommodate their enthusiasm conferences and workshops on Egyptian history, art and architecture multiplied being now well attended; knowledge was spreading; and, by the time a conservation programme was established, public awareness had risen considerably.

Buzzwords such as restoration, preservation and renovation began to pepper smart conversations. Books on Islamic art and architecture began flying out of the shops and suddenly, funds for giving the old quarters a new lease of life became miraculously available. In no time, ministering to the past had become the only game in town.

The previous decades had belonged to the development racket, to the greatest profit of some unscrupulous promoters; the new century was poised to become the age of heritage preservation.

No longer earmarked for providing rural homemakers with sewing machines and chickens, money seemed to move smoothly to the realm of restoration: almost overnight, historical Cairo was slated for a wholesale, complete overhaul. Gone were the times when one architect, with the help of a couple of assistants, painstakingly worked on a monument for years, lovingly cleaning and mending floors, ceilings and walls, careful not to remove the signs of age or the faded paintbrush strokes of a long-gone anonymous artist. The 20 years spent by the director of the Italo-Egyptian Centre, professor of architecture Giuseppe Fanfoni, on restoring almost single-handedly the Sama'khana of the Mawlawiya Dervishes belonged to the past. The enlightened public may not know it, but for the past four years, Fanfoni has been trying to obtain a permit to create a training centre for restorers. He has met with little success so far. "The paperwork is daunting," he sighs, "but I am trying not to let it get me down."

It seems that as we briskly enter the 21st century, Egypt no longer needs authentic artists and craftsmen to care for its ancient monuments. Clearly,

the best-informed authorities feel we can now replace them with machines, computers, marble from Italy and lots of cement, Portland or otherwise. It also appears that we are in a hurry. Having let the original masterpieces go to pieces, we must now cover up our mistakes and silence international criticism. Tourism is an integral part of our ailing economy and we are in the business of attracting foreign visitors. They want monuments? We will give them what they want, and more. For their sake, we will make our old mosques, churches, *madrasas* and *sabils* look brand-new, with extra decorations in Carara marble, heavily gilded bronzes and several coats of imported acrylic paint. We will banish the indigenous population and their less-than- decorative traditional activities. Tourists flock to Disneyland by the thousands; we will give them an amusement park worth their money. We will pave the streets for their convenience and transform our *haras* and places of worship into a showcase, a super-Arabland complete with make-believe artisans, cafés and souvenir shops.

Such ambitious plans sent the cost of the work to be done soaring to vertiginous heights, and as it did, the prospect of hefty profits attracted sleek building contractors who were prompt to displace specialists. To those who express doubts about the competence of this new breed of restorers, stern requests to mind their own business were addressed. One engineer attached to a large construction company specialising in instant restoration was even more blunt: "Why are you fussing so much?" he asked impatiently. "A building is a building. Our ancestors built mosques with the tools and materials at hand. Today, we can build bridges and high-rises. Our methods and equipment are superior. Surely we can produce exact copies of their buildings -- only better, because we are engineers and architects, not ignorant masons."

Such misguided enthusiasm, occasionally displayed in a hastier than usual patch-up job, finally sounded the alarm. It was rumoured that serious mistakes had been committed in the restoration of Ibn Tulun Mosque. Al-Ghuri had not fared much better. After several visits by interested parties to the various restoration sites, a letter was circulated, pointing out the more flagrant shortcomings of the colossal enterprise. UNESCO took notice and wrote an internal report selectively criticising some of the procedures and materials used in the drive to refurbish the Fatimid city and Old Cairo. Excerpts from this document, leaked to the Egyptian press, placed critics and offenders in an awkward position.

Eventually, a four-day symposium, postponed after the events of 11 September, was reinstated under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture. It opened on 16 February, and gathered the donors and the gurus, namely members of UNESCO, ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites), ICCROM (the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property) and the Agha Khan

Foundation, as well as the Egyptian authorities entrusted with the execution and supervision of the restoration work and yearning for their labours to receive a clean bill of health. The Supreme Council for Antiquities was represented by its director, Gaballa Ali Gaballa; several members from the Ministry of Culture attended, headed by Ayman Abdel-Moneim, who introduced himself as the supervisor of antiquities at the ministry; one architect from the Arab Contractors was present, as well as a number of architects who had carried out restorations under the aegis of the ministry and in collaboration with the American Research Centre in Egypt (ARCE). From the general attitude of the participants and organisers, it transpired that this was not the time to display true feelings.

Interestingly, although Egyptian television covered the event extensively, the print press shone by the absence of its representatives, as did the Ministry of Endowments, although a strong case could have been made for the latter's presence, since this ministry owns over 90 per cent of the land on which the monuments stand. (Every founder endowed his or her mosque with business enterprises, the proceeds from which were destined to cover maintenance costs; the ministry now has control of these endowments.)

Absent also were architects and engineers who so recently had expressed misgivings at the suitability of certain technical procedures, shock at the rumours of a five-star hotel to be built on the site of Suq Al-Lamoun (the lemon market) outside Bab Zuweila, and horror at the "development" of vacant plots on Al-Mu'izz Street, where pseudo-Arabesque blocks were said to be planned. Whatever the reasons for the oversight, the symposium, it was obvious, had not been advertised widely enough to allow a number of professionals and members of the interested general public to attend.

The conference opened in an atmosphere of discontent as many people were left out of the exiguous meeting space. Those who managed to push their way through found no seats and huddled as best they could in narrow passages. The message could not have been clearer: the public was not welcome. Having delivered his opening address, Professor Francesco Bandarin, director of the World Heritage Center, departed for more pressing appointments overseas.

The topics presented had been chosen carefully not to allow for too much controversy, and the presenters confined themselves to generalities or esoteric technicalities which could not have led to an honest exchange had the time allotted to questions allowed for one. To those who knew the inside story of the restoration drive, it seemed that the project leaders were using the right jargon to describe procedures they had not really followed. Soon the audience was thoroughly confused, hearing the right words but knowing that they did not apply to the case studies. In the same spirit, the delegation was taken on a visit of the Ibn Tulun Mosque at dusk, when thorough observation of the work was practically impossible. The correct and beautiful work done by Bernard Maury, an architect with the Ministry of Culture, in restoring Beit El-Sennari and Beit El-Harawi was not properly highlighted, nor was Fanfoni's independent project ever brought to the fore as an example of truthful preservation.

Architect Flemming Aalund of the UNESCO World Heritage Center refused to be drawn into a qualitative assessment of Egyptian restoration efforts and confined himself to

outlining the techniques of conservation during the 30 minutes allotted to his exposé, although it was no secret that he had signed the critical in-service report on the Monitoring Mission to Islamic Cairo, dated 6-18 August 2001. The report warned that, although there "can be no doubt that rescue operations are urgently needed in view of the dilapidated condition of a great number of buildings... this rapid undertaking also creates the risk of making mistakes in a very delicate balance between the current needs of a fast-growing urban community and respect for authenticity and unique heritage values."

After visits to 47 historic monuments under restoration, the monitoring mission had noticed important discrepancies in the quality of workmanship.

**Mashrabiya crafting; the mosque and
wikala of Al-Ustadar**

While praising the recently completed restoration of Al-Ghuri Mosque, which "respects the original materials and the historic chronology of changes that have occurred over some 500 years," and preserves the mosque's "dignity and monumental character" (it should be noted that a number of Egyptian architects do not share the mission's opinion in this respect), the report criticises "the renovation currently being carried out at the Sargathmish Mosque. Overnight cleaning of the façade with sand abrasive under high pressure has destroyed delicate detailing in the stone masonry of the stalactites at the entrance porch without paying attention to traces of paint and decorations. New marble panelling is being applied in the interior of the courtyard despite the fact that no elements remain of the original dado..."

It could have been profitable for future restoration endeavours to hear Aalund express his genuine opinion. He chose not to do so and it is only later, reading the *Reports of the Rapporteurs* distributed to the audience on the last day of the conference, that the reader realised a comparison between the correct procedures outlined in this document and those being used by a number of contractors did not favour the Egyptian practices.

If any message rang out loud and clear amid all the double-speak, it was that restorers must adopt a minimalist approach. "Considering that values change over time, it was emphasised that conservation is necessarily also a learning process. Considering the past values of a heritage site may not be perceived or fully understood in the present time, a minimalist approach should always be adopted when intervening on a monument or historic building. The purpose of restoration is to preserve and reveal the aesthetic and historic values of a historic building, and it should always be based on respect for original material. Such respect should take into account all significant changes that have occurred in the history of the place, implying the critical use of relevant methodologies, such as building archeology in order to identify the dates of the different phases," states the report.

It would have been constructive to add that whenever possible, restoration work should be reversible: transforming a precious fountain into a gaudy Jacuzzi is certainly regrettable, but in no way as serious an offence as replacing metres of old stones by new ones on the Aqueduct.

Groundwater which damages the foundations of monuments irreparably is one of the greatest concerns of conservationists. The water table seems to be rising rather than diminishing, although it was agreed at the conference that its level is not stable. Of the many techniques applied to free buildings from this constant menace, none has been successful. Several procedures, some more dangerous for the monuments than others, were outlined without entirely solving the problem. There was disagreement as to the cause of the rising water table, one school contending that it was a problem

of faulty water pipes and sewers, others that it was due to the long-term effect of the High Dam on Cairo's infrastructure, while others still blamed the proximity of Ain Al-Sira: land reclamation has diminished the lake's surface considerably, preventing proper evaporation. The excess humidity can only seep underground. None of the arguments seemed to win the day and no definitive resolution of the problem was in sight.

Many Egyptians would like to see the historical areas of Cairo transformed into pedestrianised open-air museums, graced with quaint cafés, chic souvenir shops and a few faux Egyptian restaurants. Without the people and the traffic, they argue, the life of the monuments will be extended and restoration work will be a simple matter.

Yet it is people who are the life of a place, the guarantee that it will evolve and ultimately survive. Besides, tourists come for the people as well as the monuments. They want to experience life to the full in Egypt. The point is: how much of it are we prepared to put on display? If we want to present tourists with the naked truth, then let us forget the litter, the open sewers and the pollution from workshops, because this is the authentic picture. If we want to offer a sanitised version of reality, then let us start reconstructing the infrastructure and providing a proper system of garbage collection. This will be a tremendous step towards putting some order in the chaos. Furthermore, we should identify those "people" to whom we often refer with tears in our voices (as in: "but where will *all these people* go if we remove the source of their livelihood and deprive them of the only place they know?"). Many shopkeepers and workshop owners in the Muski, the Hamzawi, Al-Azhar, Gamaliya and Khan Al-Khalili do not "belong" to the area, but have dwellings in more affluent parts of the city as well as shops in five-star hotels and at the airport. They could easily make regular contributions to the maintenance of the area and its monuments, as well as contribute to its cleanliness. Once they go home to Mohandessin and Heliopolis they would not dream of throwing their garbage in the street or on their doorsteps. In the same spirit, they could train their craftsmen and employees in some elementary principles of tidiness. On the other hand, there are inhabitants who occupy the floors above the shops as well as other nearby historical quarters. With an adequate sewer system and a regular service of garbage collection, including fines for those who insist on littering, the situation could improve tremendously. In this way, tourists can have their dose of authenticity without being turned off by sights that may ruffle their sensibilities terminally. The money spent on tons of marble and unsightly and incongruous decorations to revamp the monuments can be spent better on hiring experts to create a monument-friendly drainage system from which both tourists and "the people" would benefit.

Cairo's traffic situation may be the worst in the world, and nowhere are its nefarious effects felt as in the historic city, where they are compounded by

the need to accommodate huge tourist buses. At the conference, the much-admired governor of Cairo, Abdel-Rahim Shehata, exposed his project of pedestrianising Al-Azhar Street now that the tunnel is operational. Nawal Hassan, chair of the Association for the Urban Development of Islamic Cairo, then presented a Modified Project Protecting Community Livelihood. Her objections were based on the premises that "the proposed intervention will devastate and disseminate the community. The historic city has been the main commercial and industrial centre of Cairo since the end of the 19th century, and is certainly a main commercial centre today. Thousands of families' livelihoods will be affected by the decision to turn Al-Azhar Street into a pedestrian street. Wholesale and retail shops will lose their clients if they have to reach their destination on foot from the perpendicular streets, Sharia Port Said in the West and Salah Salem. (Electric cars, which have been proposed, are too expensive, affordable mainly to tourists and not suitable for transporting the bulky packages of ordinary Egyptians who come from the provinces to buy materials in bulk to furnish bridal households)." Unmoved, the governor stuck to his project.

As the symposium wound down, it became obvious that the experts would not obtain what they had hoped for, namely that the conservation of historic Cairo be placed under a unified body as opposed to the many ministries and government-sponsored organisations which at present often work at cross-purposes. Law, asserted Gaballa, has divided the responsibility for the monuments and under no circumstances will it be changed. The final recommendation was therefore suitably watered down, instructing "that the institutional framework and coordination mechanisms among the various concerned authorities for Historic Cairo be strengthened."

Was the symposium one more exercise in futility? Not quite, since it clarified the positions of the main actors and sent the message that in conservation, the policy of least intervention is the best. One can only hope that the authorities will take notice.

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